

D. In Anticipation of the Invasion of the “Yellows”

Throughout the years of the joint existence of the Skarżysko and Apparatebau factories, there was an exchange of workers between the two factories and, in Częstochowa, they knew that, in Werk C in Skarżysko, they were making mines from Pikryna powder [TN: picric acid], which turned people into yellow creatures. And now, in the middle of the summer, the rumour spread that, with the advance of the Red Army, the Germans would evacuate the Skarżysko factories. So, would the “yellows” come to us too?

The transports, that were about to come, were heralded by the transport of about 150 Jews from Piotrków, who arrived in the early summer of 1944. But they did not stay long in Częstochowa - the women were transferred to Ravensbrück and the men to Buchenwald. Apparently, this transport is what the report of “Labour Statistics-Buchenwald” (*Arbeitsstatistik-Buchenwald*) refers to, which provides data on Jews from Częstochowa, who arrived on 25th December 1944, and “will be in HASAG only for a short time”.¹

Another sign that foreshadowed bad things were the “small” selections, which were held more frequently. It seemed as if the management wanted to prepare a place for new transports. Sometimes miracles would happen. Halina Barkani recounts:

“To this day, I still feel the sense of terror of that time. During one of the selections, a mad thing happened to me - I was transferred to the group designated for transport. Suddenly, a group of *Gestapo* men passed by us. One of them glanced in our direction and our eyes met. He stopped, told me to come forward and said, ‘What are you doing? She’s the best worker.’ I went back to the line. I’ll never know why he saved me.”

During another selection, the commander of the *Werkschutz* took out Hanka Richter’s mother. Hanka immediately joined her. Before the group was transported, the German examined her and asked Hanka why she was here. Her answer was, “Because I’m going with my mother”.

In response, he sent them both back to the line.²

At the same time, purges were also carried out in Skarżysko, where, according to official data from 3rd April 1944, there was a total of 7,373 Jews in the camp - in the three “Werks”.³ Of them, 1,500 men were sent to Buchenwald, 1,200 women to Leipzig, about 1,000 remained in Skarżysko for sorting work and they were later sent to Sulejów.

¹ *Arbeitsstatistik-Buchenwald, Juden aus Tschenstochau von 25.12.44, Archiv der Nationalen Mahn u. Gedenkstätte Buchenwald (NMG), NS 4-Bu, 109*

² Bela Sandler, YVA, 0-33/6882, p. 9; “Duography”, p. 140.

³ *Werk Sk.-Kamienna, 03/04/1944, Betr.: Personal, APCZ, section 192/2, ref. 8, p. 81*

In all three selections, about 600 prisoners were murdered altogether. It is, therefore, clear that about 2,500 Jews arrived in Częstochowa, who were divided between the Warta, Raków and Apparatebau factories⁴. (The “Częstochowianka” camp was not yet ready). It seems that, at the end of July and the beginning of August 1944, three transports were sent to Częstochowa. One of them, which consisted only of women, also included Irena Bruner. In her testimony, she recounts her adventures during the journey:

“Together with me was my friend Marysia Wilenko. We got into the carriages. In front of us and behind us were Germans armed with rifles. They showed no hostility towards us. We did not even believe that the end of the war was near – the fact that the carriages were open and the weather was fine awakened, in us, a joy of life which had been stifled within us for so long. We began to sing. The uncertainty of our fate aroused in us a dark humour. The guards, who were accompanying us, threw us chocolate and bread.

“In our carriage there was one girl, who stood out with her reddish hair and distinguished herself with her pleasant voice, which rang like silver bells. She sang beautifully in Polish and German. We called her ‘Elsa the Red’. The guards called her the ‘Swedish Nightingale’. It was obvious that her singing evoked warm memories in them.

“After several hours of travel, we were tired. We ran out of bread. We were hungry and now we sang less often. We stopped at a station. German civilians got out of the carriages. One of them, in a Tyrolean hat, looked at us curiously. Polish railway workers approached the carriages. We asked for bread. One of them brought a loaf and demanded a fantastic price for it. We couldn’t buy it. A second railway worker approached us, looked around him restlessly and said, ‘If you have any gold, silver or diamonds – throw them to us. You won’t need them anymore. Either way, you’re going to [become] soap’.

“We fell silent in horror. Some sobbed. The Germans on the platform noticed the change in our mood and one of them, the one in the hat, turned to ‘Elsa the Red’ and asked, ‘Swedish Nightingale, why are you so sad?’ Since we were ‘going to soap’ anyway, Elsa shouted in despair, ‘For God’s sake, tell us the truth! Is it true that we are going to soap?’

At first, the Germans did not seem to understand what was it about. Then they whispered among themselves and assured us that we were going to work. Then one of the guards shouted that it was the Polish pigs (*Polnische Schweinehunde*) who had frightened us. The Germans chased away the train workers and forbade us to talk to them.

“The train moved and we thought, ‘Is it possible that the train workers were telling the truth?’”⁵

⁴ Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, p. 129.

⁵ Testimony of Irena Bruner, YVA, 0-33/1656.

Among the men sent to Częstochowa was also Nojeh Tal, 17. In his testimony, he recounts a strange conversation he had with one of the Ukrainian guards while still in Skarżysko.

“Do you know”, the Ukrainian asked him, “why you are standing here?”

When Nojeh stammered out some answer, the guard continued, “You Jews, you never have a state. You have never had one and you will never have one, because you are cowards and you cannot protect your state. If you had a state, no one would dare to do anything to you. Look, you look just like me. Why don’t you go to Palestine? The war will soon be over. You will probably seek revenge. You should also understand us. Build yourself another state.”

“And I”, Nojeh continues, “I had completely forgotten that Palestine existed. But, as soon as he mentioned it to me, I remembered that we had a land plot of sorts.”⁶

And with these words in his ears – “To build a state in Palestine” – Nojeh went to Częstochowa.

A hot day in early August had arrived, and the train finally stopped at the “HASAG-Częstochowa” station. The passengers began to slowly alight from the carriages. A large group of Jews from Werk C also arrived, their yellow faces causing great astonishment among everyone. Those, who arrived, were divided into three groups - the largest was sent to the Warta factory, the second one, where there were many women, remained in the Apparatebau and the third, to which the policemen from Skarżysko were added, was sent to the Raków factory – the most difficult.

The reception at the Apparatebau camp was beyond all expectations, testifies Irena Bruner. The girls were received by several German and Jewish ushers, who treated them cordially. The women were taken to the upper floor of the building, where a long, narrow hall awaited them, with bunks arranged on both sides in two tiers. They were given delicious soup and, from the warehouse, they were given a towel and soap. To her delight, Irena found acquaintances - the Bodzechowski family, who had helped her extensively. Janina Laksberger was also pleasantly surprised. Fifteen-year-old Lili Sznycer, who did not know how to cope at all in the cruel reality of Skarżysko camp, came to the conclusion that her life would be easier here.⁷

In the work arrangement, the foremen tried to place the newcomers in jobs with which they were already familiar. Ester Zajdel remembers their statement that “they consider us workers and not prisoners”. And there were fewer beatings. Szoszana Rubinsztajn is amazed and says,

“I worked at gardening and took two radishes. When a foreman caught me, I explained to him that if I was not hungry, I wouldn’t steal. It helped.”

⁶ Testimony of Nojeh Tal, YVA, 0-3/9484.

⁷ Testimony of Lili Sznycer, YVA, 0-33/3103.

Flora Marder was lucky, as she fell asleep at the machine and the *Meister* pretended not to see.⁸ But not all the women were well received. Hanna Rittermann was beaten and did not lick honey, as was Bronia Ofir, who was sent to the ward of Klara “the Beautiful”. Maryla Lieberman was sent to the “*Geschoss 2cm*” department, where supervision was in the hands of *Meister* “*Szczypiorek*” (Polish: “green onion”), a famous sadist. The kick, which she received from him, cost Maryla a tooth and she received a dose of lashes.⁹

But, in general, there was a shift in the behaviour of some *Meisters* for the better. “If it were not for us, they would have gone to the *Ostfront*.”¹⁰ As a symbol of new times, *Meister* Willi Nespethal appeared at that time at the *Rekalibrierung*. He became an enigma to his employees - he helped his employees in every possible way, stole food for them, did not press to work and never beat anyone. They said that he was a communist.¹¹

Leon Kurman also arrived from Skarżysko, whose “odyssey” is noteworthy. In March 1944, he was sent from Łódź to the Warta factory, from where, after a few weeks, he was transferred to Skarżysko. In the summer of 1944, he landed in Apparatebau. Of course, he liked the new place and even the Germans - “Stieglitz jokes all the time! And the soups are good too. There were a lot of rich and educated people in this camp.”

Kurman’s neighbour in the bunk was an elderly Jew named Rotbart from Częstochowa.

One evening a conversation developed between them:

Kurman: “Mr. Rotbart, what do you think, will we manage to stay alive?”

Rotbart (after a long silence): “No!”

Kurman: “Is that what you think? How can you say for sure that we won’t stay alive?”

Rotbart: “When the Germans will be a minute before their fall, before twelve o’clock, they will murder us all!”

Kurman: “My aunt, who was in the ghetto, said that a situation could arise where the Germans would not have time to carry out their plan.”

Rotbart: “You two are both naive!”

⁸ YVA testimonies: Ester Zajdel, 0.3/5258; Shoshana Rubinstein, 0.3/5468; Flora Marder, 0-33/1874.

⁹ Testimonies from YVA: Hanna Rittermann, 4597/M-49/E; Bronia Ofir, 0-33/6859; Maryla Lieberman, 0-33/7184.

¹⁰ Testimony of Sima Dancyger, YVA, 0.3/8311.

¹¹ YVA testimonies: Hela Igelberg, 0.3/7704; Hinda Brajter, 0.3/8385.

Kurman was unable to continue conducting conversations about the future, because he was sent with a group of prisoners to the town of Przedbórz, where they were to build a camp and dig anti-tank trenches. But by the time a new order came, he was again sent to Częstochowa, this time to the Częstochowianka camp.¹²

Among the last to leave Skarżysko was Kalman Kornfeld, a chief electrician who, according to the plan, was tasked with preparing the explosion of the factories after the prisoners left. But the plan did not work out and he arrived at Apparatebau in *Meister* Zinder's private car. On the way, he saw the convoys of cars in which the Germans were fleeing. We finally see their defeat!! At the factory, he was appointed manager of the chrome department and also worked on private jobs for the Germans.

In general, Skarżysko's people were not doing badly. Several experienced people became supervisors of machines, among them Majer Wajsblum, a member of the Zionist youth movement, Bnei Akiwa. Among the girls, who worked for him, was also Sara Folberg, whom he had known before, but had not yet decided. As luck would have it, one day at the morning inspection, Günther again made a selection and took Sara out of the line!

"I approached *Meister* Günther and asked, that I want to go out with her too. Why? – Günther was surprised. 'That's my wife', I replied. Then the *Meister* put Sara back in line!"¹³

At the end of the summer of 1944, a change was felt in the factory.

From time to time, sirens sounded and the prisoners ran to the shelters. For a few days, panic even broke out among the Germans, because a rumour had spread that the Soviets were advancing westward. Some of the foremen had already begun packing their bags. But the rumours fell silent, because the front had stopped at the Wisła River. In August, the Polish uprising broke out in Warsaw and no one knew what tomorrow would bring.

In such an atmosphere, the High Holidays approached. A feeling of disquiet was felt among the prisoners. The religious Jews secretly organised a whole series of *minyanim* to conduct prayers.

Benjamin Orenstein testified,

"They took place under conditions that are impossible to describe. It was truly surreal, and yet it was reality,".

The "circus" became a central synagogue. It was surrounded by several rows of guards, whose job was to announce any approaching danger. The worshippers left their workplaces and came to pray. Prayers were also held in Barrack No. 7 and others. Joseph Kutner, Nojeh Edelist and Nechemje Trąbkowski appeared as cantors.

¹² Testimony of Leon Kurman, YVA, /M-49/E/4245

¹³ Testimonies from YVA: Kalman Kornfeld, 0-3/6138; Majer Wajsblum, 0-33/7148.

The shoemaker Dorfgang even managed to procure a *shofar*.¹⁴ When Yom Kippur arrived, someone made sure that the soup would be brought that day not at noon but in the evening.

What words can describe the tears and heartbreak of the worshippers, each of whom eulogised their loved ones?

*Do not weep, do not lament, but understand
The bloody and gruesome events that happened.
The sacred goals, set by the victims,
Oblige us to fulfil them:
Do not forget!
Those condemned to die
Left this will.
With warm kisses they parted;
With desperate steps they walked;
Stifling their sorrow and pain...¹⁵*

(Benjamin Orenstein (excerpts), [loosely] translated from Yiddish [to Hebrew] by Dora Sternberg.)

It was not possible to organise prayers especially for women. They celebrated mostly individually or in small groups, each with her own memories, each with her own tears. And, sometimes, it would happen that, from the lips of all of them, poetry would rise – poetry that shook souls and made hearts tremble:

“Suddenly, sounds were heard and a cascade of trembling voices flowed and, above the scene of the murder, above the murderers and the murdered, a mighty song burst forth. It contained some great plea for life and a prayer for those dying in agony.

“It seemed to me that we all suddenly grasped clearly what was happening, that we had awakened from our dullness and it dawned on our consciousness, perhaps for the first time, that thousands died yesterday, are dying today and will die tomorrow – all of these here, human beings like everyone else, feeling, loving, longing.

“This moment of silence was probably needed amidst the constant turmoil of the last few weeks for this realisation to arise.

(Hadasa Wizenberg, HASAG 1944)

The song fell silent. The voices fell silent. And, again, the weekdays began, day after day, week after week...

¹⁴ *Sefer Częstochowa*, p. 133.

¹⁵ *Churban Czenstochow*, p. 215